

Storms left their mark

The Camas-Washougal area has had its share of severe storms over the years.

Maybe it's the towns' locations near the Columbia that subjects them to the ferocities of wind, rain and snow. At any rate, the residents of the area have been victims of adverse weather — sometimes without warning.

1880 storm damaged timber
A terrific wind storm racked the Clark County area on Jan. 9, 1880, causing severe damage to the few farms in the area. According to one account, "huge trees fell as if they were being mowed down."

Trees and debris were piled twenty feet high or more by the wind. Some livestock, frightened by the storm, was crushed by the falling trees.

The storm lasted only a few hours, leaving as quickly as it had arrived. But the isolated farmers in the region were cut off from each other by the fallen trees over the roads.

The only reported deaths and injuries in Clark County were in the Bartlett School in La Center, where two children were killed and 24 injured when a tree fell on their school.

"The damage to timber in Clark County is immense, and seemingly beyond computation," reported the Vancouver Independent on Jan. 15, 1880. "The wind took down all the tallest and best trees."

Some trees were down on remote roads until late spring.

Two lesser windstorms — one on June 2, 1894, and the other on Jan. 2, 1895 — were mixed with snow and

hail, but were not nearly as damaging.

Silver thaw wrecked
The legendary "silver thaw" of Feb. 2, 1916 — so-called because the thaw after winter had supposedly ended — was called by the Feb. 4, 1916, Camas Post the "most destructive storm in the history of the locality."

"With the onset of warmer weather, people began to think winter was over," the Post reported. "But their general expectations were doomed to disappointment as the silver thaw closed in."

The sleet, snow and wind snapped utility poles off at the ground, and the Post reported that "those poles on Fourth and Fifth streets in Camas were a total loss."

Downtown Camas was a mass of tangled wires and workers at the mill were sent home and notified to stay until they heard five blasts from the mill whistle.

According to the Post, the high-power transmission line went down at 8 a.m., just before shift change at Crown Zellerbach, stopping work there.

But the biggest loss of the famed silver thaw was that of the area's prune orchardists. State Horticultural Inspector I. R. Fletcher estimated that storm damage to prune trees was heavy — over \$5,000.

"All exposed orchards suffered heavily," he reported, "first from the wind and then from a heavy, biting frost."

The Camas High School was closed because there was no supply of water with which to steam-heat the

building.
Another silver thaw struck the area on Nov. 21, 1921, also damaging fruit trees. Poles and wires survived this storm, though, and the mill was shut down for only a short time.

Huge rain of '37
Camas-Washougal waited until 1937 until the next storm of consequence. But it made up for all the years of no truly adverse weather, beginning Christmas Day of that year.

That day and the next one, the sky opened and dumped 4.31 inches of rain on the area in 40 hours. By New Year's Day, 7.35 inches had fallen, coupled with a terrific wind.

Creeks were swollen into roaring rivers, with the normally placid Lackamas Creek flowing over a number of bridges. Luckily, the Washougal River was not as badly affected since the huge precipitation came down as snow near the river's headwaters. Even so, the river rose to a level of ten feet, with four feet being normal for that time of year.

The greatest water problem was with the dam on Lackamas Lake, where a crew of 30 men had to build an auxiliary dam of sandbags to keep water from roaring into the mill ditch and flooding Camas. After a tense vigil, the waters subsided and the danger passed.

But the worst tragedy of the downpour came on Sunday, Dec. 26, during one of the worst rains of the wet week. A westbound freight train hurtled into a slide, four miles east of Washougal, which had blocked the tracks, derailing two engines and killing John Malloy, 27, a Vancouver brakeman, and Everett Wilson, 59, a Portland fireman. The wooden boxcar of the train were "reduced to matchwood," the Dec. 30, 1937 Post said. The derailing also took out over 200 feet of track and disrupted telephone service between Stevenson and Washougal by knocking down utility poles.

A severe windstorm Dec. 4, 1945, blew down many trees, some blocking the Evergreen Highway three miles west of Camas. Power to the mill was knocked out for several hours after a southeasterly wind "roared up the Columbia," the Dec. 6, 1945 Post reported.

Sleet and snow
hit in '50

A sleet and snow storm that surprised Camas-Washougal on Jan. 19 and

Storms...

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20, 1950, was what the Jan. 26, 1950, Post called "the most destructive battle with snow and ice in the area's history." Power and telephone service was totally disrupted throughout Clark County, and business came to a standstill in the two towns.

Prune orchards once again were hard hit, this time experiencing \$300,000 in damage from uprooting by wind and bark stripping by the sleet. Rescue crews fought 75-mph winds and 35-foot snowdrifts around the Cape Horn area to bring food and supplies to desperate families.

The worst result of the storm was its effects on the PUD's electrical service in the area. Lights began going out all over the county the night of Thursday, the 19th.

By the following morning, Camas was the only area with power. Any repair work done was immediately nullified by new breaks in the lines. Pacific Power and Light's 66,000-volt lines fell into the Columbia the next day, Saturday, cutting power to the mill in half. In all, 21,000 electrical customers were without power in the county at some time. The PUD counted 1,129 utility poles down.

Strong wind the next year
On Jan. 15, 1951, more winds ripped the area, this time reaching speeds of up to 80 mph. Damage was mostly confined to roofing being blown off and trees falling, breaking electrical and telephone lines.

Columbus Day — 1962
Within the memory of most is the disastrous storm of Oct. 12, 1962 — "The Columbus Day Storm" — which rocked the states of Oregon and Washington with winds gusting up to 110 mph.

The wind raked heavily through the Camas-Washougal area. The small-boat moorage at the Port of Camas-Washougal was hardest hit, with damage running over \$100,000 to boats and docks. Sheet metal from the marina roof was found all over the Port area and even at Oak Park, several blocks away.

Mayor Bill Sampson of Camas estimated property damage within the city limits to be over \$200,000 due to the storm.

Total damage in Clark County to lines and poles was estimated by the PUD at \$500,000. After the storm, which lasted only through the night of Oct. 12, Camas and Washougal got power back eight hours

before the rest of the county. Long distance telephone service was out the entire weekend following the storm, but normal service was restored Tuesday, Oct. 16.

Miraculously, there was very little damage to either Camas or Washougal schools.

Most recently —
October 1974

Saturday, October 21, 1974, was Camas-Washougal's most recent bout with the elements as high winds whipped through the area, causing widespread damage to businesses and homes.

Power went out in the

area about 2:30 Saturday morning. Most areas had it restored in five hours or less.

By far, the worst-hit spot in Camas-Washougal was the Turf Restaurant, 217 NE Fourth, Camas. Fifty to sixty persons were in the building when the back wall collapsed, causing a panic

among customers. No one was hurt.

J.C. Penney, Farrell and Eddy's and the credit union office in Camas also suffered minor damages.

So goes the unpredictable weather in Camas-Washougal. Be it rain, snow or sleet — it keeps things exciting.



NORTHWEST residents will long remember the Columbus Day family huddled in their basement while the entire roof of their home storm of 1962. The Big Wind blew through Camas and Washougal, cutting a wide path of destruction. On Prune Hill, the William Cyrus



COLUMBUS DAY STORM, Oct. 12, 1962, knocked down hundreds of trees in the area, in Crown Park, up by the school, and across from Louis Bloch Park, as shown at the home of Mrs. Arthur (Clons) Thayer, pictured here, on NE 3rd Ave., Camas.